Children Wage-Earners in India

BY

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"THE CHILD IN THE MIDST" SERIES

CHILDREN WAGE-EARNERS IN INDIA

MANY and frequent are the paradoxes which confront one as eastern mission fields are studied, and a consideration of childhood in these lands surely presents no exception to this rule. While the duties and cares of manhood and womanhood settle upon children all too early and rob them of their childhood, it is equally true that adults, especially women, rarely, if ever develop beyond childhood, when we consider them mentally.

Never was "the child" more scientifically studied than at the present day, and in this we are exercising true wisdom, for America's future depends more upon the method of the development of the rising generation to-day than ever before. The men and women who shall be the recognized citizens of to-morrow, are found in large numbers in the foreign settlements of our cities and our manufacturing towns. But truly, if we but open our eyes to the vision that lies before us, in a very positive sense, the development of the child of every nation is a matter of great moment to us as Americans, aside from our duty to them as Christians.

The ideas of work and play are so associated, not only in dealing with children, but humanity in general, that it is difficult to separate the two. Frequently do we satisfy our own troubled thought concerning the indignities heaped upon the wee tots of eastern climes by the threadbare conclusion that "children develop earlier in the East, and thus dismiss what heaven-born sympathy we may have entertained for a passing moment, and turn our thought to some more pleasing consideration. Undoubtedly the day is rapidly passing when this will be possible. Childhood, not only by our own fireside, on our own doorstep, or in our own neighborhood, but in every quarter of the globe, is crying out to us for a right to develop. In our tours, touch upon whatever shore we may, we discover that this right is denied.

The author of this article has been invited to write on this subject out of her own experience, which, as related to the mission fields,

is confined to South India; but unquestionably, what is true in India is probably true elsewhere, modified, necessarily, by the industries of each country.

Every cent and fraction thereof figures so greatly in the family life of the mass of eastern people, that the very meagre earnings of children form an important factor in the income of the family; consequently, just as early in the child's history as his or her time can be turned to commercial account, the work day begins. The four or five year old child may be utilized as nursemaid to entertain baby brother or sister throughout the livelong day while the parents are at work. The poor child has no idea of playing with baby, consequently the nursing consists of carrying the little one astride the hip most of its waking hours—a custom most pernicious to both nurse and infant.

Fuel is scarce in many parts of India, therefore many of the poorer inhabitants manufacture their own out of cow manure and the husks of grains. This commodity is also put on the market for sale. As a consequence we find the little folk wandering through the streets with their small baskets, gathering the material with which to make the family fuel, or fuel for sale, that thereby a trifle may be added to the family income. From the sale of leaf plates some families have come into very comfortable circumstances. Here child labor is frequently turned to account. These plants are made by fastening leaves of the banyan tree together with short pieces of reed and many a little child spends the day gathering these leaves and making these plates. It is usually caste children who are drafted into this service since plates handled by non-castes would have small sale. Walk or ride through any municipality or village where the weaver caste is found and you will discover the small boys who should be in school or at play, pacing the streets all day long with a distaff in their hands, or turning a wheel, preparing the thread which is to be used by the older members of the family in the weaving of cloth.

At one time we went in search of a young lad not more than six or seven years of age. His

sister was in our boarding school. The two children were orphans. The sister found the life at the school so much of a comfort after their life of wandering that she was unhappy over the life of the brother, her junior by several years, who was in the home of a native man. Being a boy it was not difficult for him to secure a home when detached from his sister. After considerable search we were able to locate the house of the man who claimed the boy, Poliah by name, but Poliah was nowhere to be found. The women of the household promised to send him to the school to see us as soon as he arrived home. We waited all day and until after nightfall, before he came. When he did finally arrive our family was at dinner, but I went to welcome him, a tiny, frail-looking, naked boy. The sister was called to identify the lad, then, while we finished our dinner, we left the two to renew their acquaintance, sending Master Poliah a large plate of curry and rice, quite out of proportion to the size of the lad. He proved himself equal to the task. After all had completed the evening meal a conference began. We discovered that this baby—for he seemed little more—had gotten up early that morning, as was his wont, begged a small portion of food in his village, and started off at daybreak with a flock of sheep and goats for which it was his duty to seek pasture lands, returning after dark. Upon hearing that we had inquired for him he ran directly to see what we wanted, without stopping for food, though he had had nothing to eat all day save the scant morning meal. In return for the care of his sheep and goats throughout the day the owner of the herd gave Poliah a place to sleep at night—a bare place on the floor of his hut. His food he begged morning and evening in the village. We had no difficulty in persuading the mite of a boy to remain with us; the difficulty lay with the liberal herdsman who felt he had been swindled, for he had no son of his own to care for him when he grew old, therefore he had adopted this one. More than this, was he not the father of the boy? When we inquired into this claimed relationship, we discovered that the tie lay in the fact that

the herdsman had given one rupee (about thirty-three cents) toward the burial of Poliah's grandmother. We were threatened with the law if we insisted upon retaining the boy. In the presence of the man we informed Poliah that we would use no force whatever to retain him. He was free to leave us at that moment or at any time he chose in the future, but if he wished to remain, we would protect him. The man departed in a rage, promising that he would return with a police officer and claim his property. We have never seen him since, and little Poliah is a grown boy in one of our mission schools—one of a few who are having a chance. There are thousands more who need a savior.

The "man with an axe to grind" is ever encountered in the East and the small boy and girl of every social or religious set becomes a prey to his devices. It matters not what the trade, we find the tiny children drafted into service.

One caste of merchantmen start their boys in business at a very early age by giving them a small coin and turning them out into the world to double it. Until the coin is doubled the boy receives only a scant portion of the very coarsest food daily. As soon as he accomplishes his task he is restored to his place in the family for a short time, when he is given a larger coin and is again cast adrift until that is doubled; thus his education proceeds until he becomes a shrewd business man. No question is ever asked about his business methods. The only thing required of him is success; methods are of little consequence.

It is claimed that there is another unique and most horrible preparation for wage earning practiced in India. Since almsgiving is looked upon as a meritorious deed whereby mortals have the hope that their next reappearance upon earth will be in some higher form of humanity, the receiver of alms is apt to have an income far in advance of many who are dependent upon their own industry. Therefore many parents welcome a deformed child into the family as a stroke of most good fortune and it is even reputed that parents will convert perfectly formed infants into cripples of one sort or other that they may add to the family income when old

enough to be turned out on the public streets to beg. However this may be, the streets are full of deformed people of all ages who might find homes in proper asylums but who prefer the life of the common beggar because of the returns. Mercifully, very young children exposed to this life frequently succumb to the exposure to the excessive heat and though their death may be preceded by the keenest suffering, it is release.

Nor is the custom of pressing young children into service confined to homes of the poor. In a country where girls become wives at twelve years of age and frequently mothers at thirteen or fourteen, it is only natural to expect that they must early assume household cares far beyond their years, consequently, at best, their childhood is of short duration.

Like all other countries India has her games and the tourist will frequently see boys playing marbles or games of tag by the roadside, but the number of children who have much leisure for play is comparatively small. In place of innocent amusements and healthful sports, the tendency of the East is to prefer the cock fight and games of chance. India also has her dolls and animal toys—most hideous creatures—but they serve as household ornaments, rather than playthings. We were invited to visit the first lady of Nellore, the wife of our Brahmin Collector, when their feast of dolls was in progress. The display was wonderful, an entire room being occupied. Artificial fish ponds, mountain passes, garden scenes in which most wonderfully attired English ladies and gentlemen figured, forests with birds of varied plumage and most ferocious wild beasts, were most tastefully arranged. The display was on exhibition for weeks and large numbers of children and adults enjoyed it, but the children of the household were never permitted to enter the room unaccompanied by their mother or some other adult who wound up the mechanical toys while the little folk stood at a distance and admired; never once were they permitted to touch one of the toys. The game was ever in the hands of the grown-ups. A child in a native home who receives a doll as a gift has no idea of how to

play with it, but immediately converts it into an ornament, setting it up in a conspicuous place and exhibiting it to everyone who comes into the home. We look upon our mission as presenting, as one of its aspects, a fine opportunity to direct the women and children of the East in their play life. It is really wonderful how quickly the eastern children grasp the idea and how naturally they enter into all sorts of lively games when once the art of play is introduced. Children in our schools are certainly very clever in executing all sorts of games and frequently we are astonished when we are invited to participate in an evening's entertainment which the boys or girls have arranged. Bible stories are frequently dramatized in a way that makes them very real. The Indian hawker is so well impersonated that one could easily forget that it is only a farce. Many times have we been convulsed with laughter at the impersonation of the sweet-meat man so commonly met at the railway stations, passing up and down the length of the waiting train seeking purchasers of his wares. Many, many times the mannerisms of missionaries have been staged in a most amusing but dignified way. Indeed the children of India can be taught to play, and doubtless this form of education is as necessary as anything of a secular nature, if indeed we can consider this as purely secular.

The spirit of Christ would lead to the emancipation of every nation beginning with Jerusalem, and is it not true that when we forget our own desires and lose ourselves in the needs of others, our own souls become more truly emancipated? Has not our Lord, when he led us into a world-wide mission opened a door to wonderful opportunity for the development of our own souls? Each nation has its own special contribution to make to the understanding of revealed truth and many believe that "when the people of India come into the kingdom of God, they will be the spiritual eyes of the church, being endowed with capacities for understanding God on the spiritual side as are no other people."

May wisdom be given us to help to lead all the world's children into the blessed light and liberty of the Gospel.

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